

Forked no lightning: remembering and forgetting in the shadow of Big Ben

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My mother died on Monday January 30, 2012. When I reached out to shut her sightless eyes the time was exactly 11:55 am. Of this I can be sure thanks to the large clock that I could see through the hospital window. This timepiece had been my constant companion during the three days I had spent at my mother's bedside. And, five minutes after her final breath, it tolled twelve times. The bell that provided this public pronouncement of a private tragedy is a familiar landmark on the skyline of London and is known the world over as 'Big Ben'. The metaphorical shadow cast by the Clock Tower of the Houses of Parliament serves as the inspiration for the following essay. It, like a number of other chapters in this book, can be understood as an instance of 'ego-histoire': the deployment of personal experiences as a means of considering 'a collective enterprise' (Popkin 1996: 1140), namely memory studies.

Memory companions

'We are never alone.'¹ So says Maurice Halbwachs in the opening chapter of *The Collective Memory* (Halbwachs 1980: 23). He illustrates this claim by recounting his first visit to London. During his stay Halbwachs was shown around by various friends, including an artist, a historian and a businessman. Seeing the world through their eyes drew his attention towards aspects that might otherwise have gone unheeded: noteworthy attractions, striking vistas and aesthetically interesting details. Later on Halbwachs retraced his steps, only this time without these companions. Yet, he adds, 'only in appearance did I take a walk alone'. The words of his friends rang in his ears and mingled with information gleaned from all manner of other

¹ Thanks to Mick Atha of the Chinese University of Hong Kong for his initial encouragement as well as invaluable comments from my Nottingham Trent University colleagues, Ruth Griffin, Patrick O'Connor, Neil Turnbull and, especially, Roy Smith.

sources (cf. Bobbio 2001: 30-1). Thus it is that, even when there is no one physically at our side, ‘we always carry with us and in us a number of distinct persons’ (Halbwachs 1980: 23).

For Halbwachs, the fact that one of these ‘distinct persons’ happened to be an artist meant that he was able to appreciate ‘the lines of the palaces and churches, and the play of light and shadow on the walls and façades of Westminster and on the Thames’ (Halbwachs 1980: 23). A prominent feature of this impressive riverscape both during Halbwachs’ lifetime and now is the Houses of Parliament or, to give it its proper name, the New Palace at Westminster. This 19th century neo-Gothic edifice is built on what remained of the old palace following a devastating fire in 1834. The resulting palimpsest provides an asymmetrical silhouette, the most recognisable feature of which is the Clock Tower, completed in 1859. Its colloquial name – Big Ben – refers in fact to the Great Bell inside. And it was this that rang out beyond the window of St Thomas’ Hospital on that mournful day in January 2012.

During my vigil the friendly, familiar form of ‘Big Ben’ functioned like a huge stopwatch, counting down the hours of my mother’s life. Its illuminated face was particularly comforting at night. And it was no mere solitary supporter. The clock came with other companions, some of whom stretch back to my formative years. Halbwachs would have understood this. For, wandering the streets of central London, his thoughts returned to the literature of his youth: ‘I took my walk with Dickens’ (Halbwachs 1980: 23). For my part, I shared my vigil with Virginia Woolf. Among my books is the battered volume of *Mrs Dalloway* that I read as a schoolboy. It is covered in immature annotations which give an insight into my thinking as I sought to get to grips with a novel unlike any I had read before. The key to my understanding was Big Ben. The clock and its chimes accompany the events of the novel as they unfold over the course of a single day in June 1923. This is particularly evident in the short story that Woolf later developed into the book. Entitled ‘Mrs Dalloway in

Bond Street' the eponymous protagonist is introduced stepping out into the metropolis just as Big Ben strikes eleven. As the 'leaden circles dissolved in the air' we gain access to her thoughts (Woolf 2012: 3). By the time of the tenth stroke we get to see her outward appearance as the stream of consciousness shifts to another character, a Mr Scope Purvis, a neighbour of Clarissa Dalloway. Whilst hurrying to his office he catches sight of the 'poised, eager, strangely white-haired' woman (Woolf 2012: 4). The reverberations of Big Ben connect them – and link to other clocks in their lives. In the home of Mrs Dalloway, for example, is 'the late clock', so called because it runs two minutes behind Big Ben. Whilst the latter is associated in Clarissa's mind with solemnity, majesty and 'laying down the law', her own clock's chimes come 'shuffling in with its lap full of odds and ends' – acquaintances to contact, items to collect, errands to run (Woolf 1976: 137-8).

A recent study of time in the Victorian period begins with Big Ben as 'a monument to standardized [public] time', a new concept deployed to exert control over 'an increasingly disciplinary industrial world' (Ferguson 2013: 1). Hence the scurrying figure of Scope Purvis for whom the tolling of Big Ben chides him for being late for work.

In *Mrs Dalloway* Woolf uses the chimes as a device to signal shifts in the narrative between characters and locations. They are also used as a means of distinguishing internal and external time, or as Woolf put it in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), the 'extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind' (Woolf 2006: 72). This has much in common with the difference that Henri Bergson draws between *temps* and *durée* (Hasler 1982: 147). For Bergson, 'inner' or 'true duration' differs from so-called clock time or what he refers to as time 'outside of me, in space' (Bergson 1950: 107-8). Whereas inner time is 'the melting of states of consciousness into one another', when it comes to time on a clock face, 'there is never more than a single position of the hand and the pendulum, for nothing is left of the past positions' (Bergson 1950: 108). Despite this disparity 'a kind of

exchange takes place' between inner and outer time. It occurs in the form of 'a conscious spectator who keeps the past in mind and sets the two oscillations or their symbols side by side in an auxiliary space' (Bergson 1950: 109).

This was borne out by my experience of seeing Big Ben from the vantage point of St Thomas' Hospital on the banks of the River Thames. I became all too aware that our lives are made up of joyful 'days of speed' and 'slow time Mondays' (Weller 1981) – like that day of the week when my mother died. Although I could literally see the hands of time, they were slowed by my inner clock and the agonies of death: 'An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length' (Woolf 2006: 72). Now, much later, as the hours have turned into months and soon years since her demise, inner time is proving just as elastic. For example, eighteen months hence I happened to be in Boston Massachusetts. Browsing a bookstore I came across a toy model of Big Ben. And suddenly my inner clock reset itself and I was back at my mother's death-bed.

That inconsequential occurrence in a Boston bookstore underscored for me the extent to which Big Ben numbers among the 'iconography of things' – a mnemonic device rooted in a specific memory place but transportable through image and rhetoric (Samuel 1994: 36). One does not need to be on the spot however: an image alone is sufficient to cause 'a piercing inner vision' (Yates 1999: 4). That said, physically being back in a memory place can make this experience even more penetrating. This was confirmed when I was next obliged to return to central London some months after my mother's death. Revisiting a familiar place after an interval of time triggers remembrances of things that took place there (Cicero in Yates 1999: 4 & 22; Bachelard 1994: 8; Halbwachs 1980: 22). In this regard Westminster is a particularly evocative memory place, a *lieu de mémoire* (Yates 1999; Nora 1996: xvii).

I, like countless visitors before me, own a little relic of this realm of memory in the form of a souvenir. Thus, as I write, I can see my schoolboy copy of *Mrs Dalloway* on a shelf alongside that yet-to-be-built Boston Big Ben plus another such model bought during my earlier trip to London. I now find that I own a collection of Big Bens. Why? Do they equate to a coming to terms with loss, a retranscription, a screening or an effort to control the past? (Kermode 2001; Gaddis 2002: 136-7). Whichever is the case, with all such groupings of things and their constellations into collections, meaning is never inherent in the objects themselves but ‘attached’ by the collector (Benjamin 1999: 207). Walter Benjamin (1999: 205) identified collecting as a form of ‘practical memory’ – the drawing together of otherwise disparate items ‘into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection.’ Regarding my miniature Big Bens, I can appreciate that they function as souvenirs of London as well as vicarious memorials to my late mother. These lilliputian Clock Towers enable me to possess a ‘trace’ of the real thing whilst also allowing me to get ‘near’ to the person whose memory they invoke (cf. Benjamin 1999: 447, 848 & 883).

It is appropriate that all my Big Bens happen to be models made up of hundreds of tiny fragments. Memory is a jigsaw; the more pieces and the older the puzzle, the more likely there are to be missing parts (Bobbio 2001: 26). On the other hand, these multiples in my collection undermine Bergson’s argument: yes, the clock hands show single positions – but it is 4:45 on one model; 10:10 on other; and 11:40 in a third. The problem is that my internal clock keeps changing the time to 11:55.



Fig. 1 Big Ben 3D Puzzle
Image courtesy of © Ravensburger Ltd. All rights reserved

A common trope of the models in my collection is that they each form one element in a range of diminutive monuments. A case in point is Ravensburger's series of 3D Puzzle buildings. [Fig. 1] This consists of famous structures from various cities around the world. Big Ben's inclusion confirms its status as an icon – both of the sonic and solid variety. The chimes of

the bell have been broadcast by the BBC since 1923 (Cannadine 2000: 21). As such it plays an important role for those far away from the capital city and, indeed, beyond even the United Kingdom (Ferguson 2013: 8). As such it is a sensory sign that works at multiple levels: the individual, the local, the national and the global. It is a synecdoche, a part that stands for a whole; in this case ‘Westminster’, a metonym of the British government. This in turn is promoted as a symbol of democracy, with the New Palace at Westminster held up as the ‘mother’ parliament – a maternal association that resonates with my own personal reading.

The Clock Tower is therefore both a private and collective landmark. Big Ben is a literal instance of ‘temporal anchoring’ (Huysen 1995: 7). Modern nation states seek to sustain themselves ‘materially in the everyday lives of their subjects and citizens... by associating the iconic inheritance of a national past with the present state and its objectives’ (Agnew in Roca et al 2011: 39). This is rendered all the more pressing in an era of unprecedented demographic change, rapid technological development and anxieties about terrorism. An encapsulation of these concerns is to be found in New York’s vanished Twin Towers. Despite – or, perhaps, *because of* – its physical absence the World Trade Center, like all such landmarks, represents a ‘fixed point’ (Welzer 2008: 285). The absent towers still cast very long shadows (Spiegelman 2004). The day of their destruction constitutes ‘an epoch’, i.e. a defined moment in time deemed to designate the beginning of a new era (OED 2013). Such landmarks are sought out amidst the ‘trifles’ of everyday life (Woolf 1976: 138; Gosse 1907: 36). These markers are then used to impose coherence on narrative accounts of the past, be they concerned with individual lives or the massed ranks of people through history (Halbwachs 1992: 61; Gaddis 2002: 19). Professional historians and other such ‘conscious spectators’ mould time. Their actions represent another of those temporal discrepancies, such as that which exists between memory and history. This prompts Gaddis to compare historians with science fiction writers. Both manipulate space and time in their writings (Gaddis 2002:

21-22). And, as we shall soon see, it is thanks to science fiction that we know that Big Ben will endure, even if all else is lost to memory.

Remembering and forgetting

Iconic landmarks are frequently used in films to establish location. The merest glimpse of Big Ben tells us that we are in London. Developed further it can be used as a device in the drama, as with the 1978 film adaptation of John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Its denouement sees the hero hanging from the minute hand of Big Ben in a desperate attempt to prevent the detonation of a bomb that has been fiendishly connected to its mechanism. The threat to this much-loved symbol is magnified by its wider ramifications: the destruction of a metonym of democracy would endanger our 'iconic inheritance' and the sense of shared ownership with which it is invested. The dramatic potential of this is used to the full in the film, *It Happened Here* (1964). The movie poster advertising this counterfactual 'story of Hitler's England' shows Nazi soldiers marching past Big Ben. Thanks to the *sotto in sù* angle the metal helmets of these gargantuan warriors reach almost as high as the clock face itself.

These are far from the only occasions that Big Ben has graced the silver screen. Indeed, in 2007 the Clock Tower came top in a poll of most iconic film locations in London (BBC 2007). Third place in the same vote came Westminster Bridge. The two combine to deadly effect in *The Dalek Invasion of Earth* (1964). These armoured cyborgs gliding across the Thames are the extra-terrestrial equivalent of the Nazi soldiers seen in *It Happened Here*. Daleks are the most hated enemy of the time-travelling *Doctor Who*, a long-running British science fiction television series that features heavily in the popular imagination of many Britons. One of the events marking the show's fiftieth anniversary in 2013 recreated the scene on Westminster Bridge by lining up four generations of Dalek beneath the shadow of Big Ben.

I watched *Doctor Who* as a child, and again as an adult following its regeneration in 2005. Early on in the first series of the contemporary era the unfortunate Big Ben is struck by a crash-landing spaceship. Meanwhile, in the third season attention shifts to the opposite bank of the Thames when Royal Hope Hospital – a fictional establishment on the site of St Thomas' Hospital – is suddenly transported to the moon.

Doctor Who also exists in the parallel world of fiction writing. One of the volumes that I read as a child was *Doctor Who and the Dalek Invasion of Earth* (1977). Its cover features Big Ben in the year 2164. A Dalek in the foreground portends the fall of civilisation. The absence of Big Ben's chimes is used to reinforce the 'dead silence' of London (Dicks 1977: 11). This closely mirrors Alfred Noyes' novel *The Last Man* (1940) where, again, the muting of the bell is a silent siren of disaster. Big Ben is also used as a means of 'temporal anchoring' in M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901). Volcanic eruption has released a gas that has annihilated all life on earth (Bulfin 2013: 153). The miasma has also settled on the world's clocks, which have all ceased at precisely the same time, their 'weird fore-fingers, pointing, pointing still, to the moment of doom' (Shiel 1901/2004: 136). This first becomes apparent on the clock face of Big Ben. Its frozen hands stop the clock on Bergson's theory of time: there is indeed just 'a single position of the hand' – for not only is nothing left of the past, the future has vanished too. In an effort to avoid creating a generation of traumatised children, the author of *Doctor Who and the Dalek Invasion of Earth* announces the return to normality via 'a sound once familiar to every Londoner, one that had been missing for a very long time – the chimes of Big Ben' (Dicks 1977: 122).

One further future projection of Big Ben charts a middle way between continuity and change. In William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890) the Palace of Westminster still stands but the nature of the 'strange game' that used to be played there is preserved only in the pages of history books. In Morris' prophetic vision the Houses of Parliament are used as 'a storage

place for manure' (Morris 1891: 34). And it transpires that the building was only saved from demolition thanks to the campaigning of an antiquarian society. Its principal function is to serve as a foil for the far better buildings constructed in Morris' socialist utopia.

These fanciful examples are revealing of Westminster's day-to-day 'struggle with forgetfulness' (Forty & Küchler 1999: 16). For its status as a realm of memory replete with historical associations and commemorative devices entails a constant battle to guard against forgetting the things that need to be remembered whilst at the same time marginalising the things that the memory 'authorities' would much prefer us to forget (de Certeau 1984: xv).

Big Ben is exemplary of this dichotomy. Even a monument whose name is known to everyone is bedevilled by amnesia. Why 'Big Ben'? Is it a reference to the politician and engineer, Sir Benjamin Hall (1802-67)? Or was it named after the bare-knuckle boxer Benjamin 'Big Ben' Caunt (1815-61)? Who cares anyway given that even the epithet Big Ben is habitually misapplied, referring as it does to the bell and not the tower.

With this in mind, there is much truth in Michel de Certeau's assertion that memory is not localizable, and – when it *does* get tied-down – it becomes subject to decay (de Certeau 1984: 86-7, 108; Forty & Küchler 1999: 7 & 59). Commemorative associations fade, as do the monuments to which they are attached. And that 'little world of space' on which a life is mapped is similarly transitory: for 'houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years' (Proust cited in Olick et al 2011: 456).

Equally fugitive are statues. Wrongly assuming that our monuments can do the remembering, society at large is sanctioned to forget (Gillis 1994: 16). An eloquent example of the slow diminution of memory are the bronzed Victorian gentleman that cast furtive glances at what was once the arena for their 'strange game'. Originally Peel, Palmerstone, Disraeli and Derby occupied pride of place at the centre of a petrified pantheon of politicians

in Parliament Square. Following the Second World War they were shifted to the periphery: a spatial manifestation of their declining significance (Burch 2003: 290).

Another eloquent example of remembering and forgetting in the shadow of Big Ben concerns the contested legacy of Oliver Cromwell. He, together with members of his family and generals in his service, were laid to rest in Henry VII's Chapel of Westminster Abbey adjacent to the Palace at Westminster. Their corpses were disinterred in 1661 following the restitution of the monarchy. Samuel Pepys records that Cromwell's grisly skull, alongside that of his son-in-law, Henry Ireton and John Bradshaw, President of the High Court of Justice, were foisted upon poles facing New Palace Yard. These admonitory memento mori remained in situ for over twenty years (Burch 2003: 234).

Cromwell continued to pose problems following the fire that ripped through the old palace in 1834 (Burch 2003: 228-289). The replacement building has rightly been described as more of 'a royal residence than a democratic legislature' (Cannadine 2000: 15). The façades are richly decorated with royal insignia and statues of the country's kings and queens through the ages. This sculpted history gave rise to a commemorative dilemma: what should be done about Cromwell? For the sake of historical accuracy and completeness he ought to have been slotted in between Charles I (executed in 1649) and his son, Charles II (restored to the throne in 1660). But placing a regicide in a royalist pantheon proved to be a commemorative step too far. Cromwell was sculpturally excised from Westminster's history. Not until the very end of the 19th century was the Lord Protector rewarded with a statue. He stands there to this day: at one remove, deep in thought and with his back turned to a parliament building that is festooned with a 'royal line that still salutes him, and will salute him forever' (Morrissey 2004).

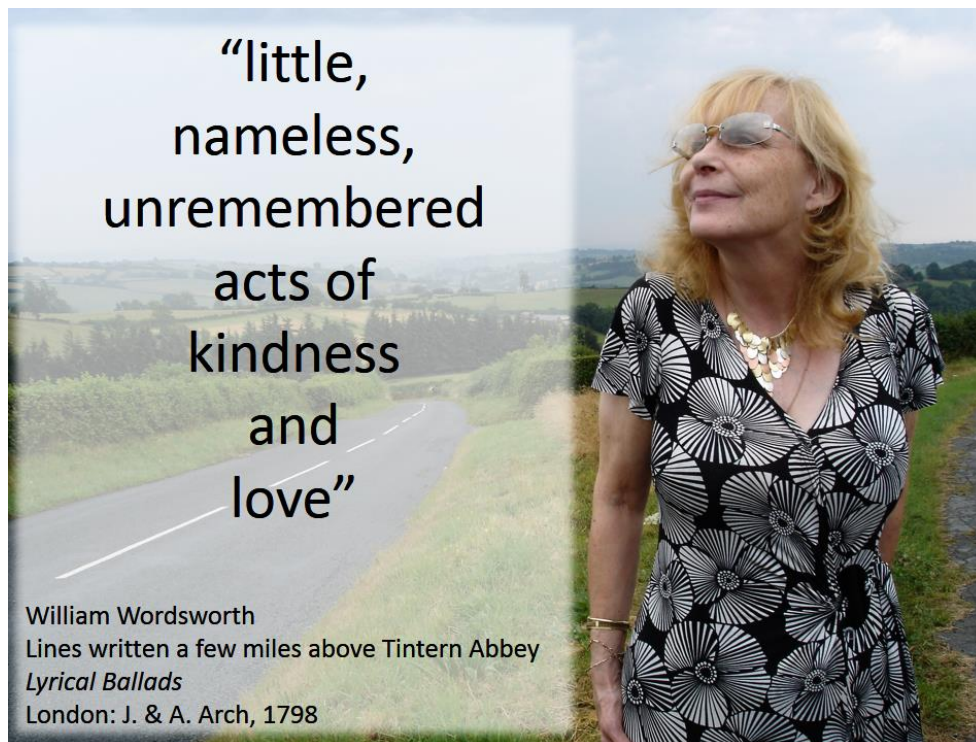


Fig. 2 William Wordsworth, ‘Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ (1798), *Lyrical Ballads*, vol. 1, 4th edn (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, 1805), p. 193. Photo: Stuart Burch

For the British obsession with the hereditary principal is in rude health. In 2012 ‘Big Ben’ was renamed the Elizabeth Tower to mark the diamond jubilee of the present monarch. This is despite the fact that each face of the tower already carries a Latin inscription to her forebear, Victoria. This renders it doubly regal. These maternal figures act as universal mothers – substitutes for all those other common women consigned to oblivion together with their ‘little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love’ (Wordsworth 1919: 86).

[Fig. 2] One commoner, however, does manage to vie for public attention, but not for acts of love and kindness. She is Margaret Thatcher, the longest serving British prime minister of the 20th century and the only woman to have so far held the post. The death of Lady Thatcher at the age of 87 left Big Ben speechless. On April 17, 2012 the chimes fell silent as her horse-drawn gun carriage bier trundled past the Houses of Parliament on its way to St Paul’s Cathedral.

Big Ben was not the only bell to be muted by the corroding Iron Lady. Those who reviled rather than revered her memory mounted a social media campaign urging people to download ‘Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead’, a jaunty tune from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. The hope being that it might attain Number 1 status to coincide with Thatcher’s militaristic funeral. This posed a problem for the BBC over whether to broadcast the song on the Official UK Singles Chart Show. In the end it opted for compromise: rather than censor it completely Tony Hall, Director-General of the BBC, decided to treat it ‘as a news story’ by ‘playing a short extract to put it in context’ (cited in Reynolds 2013).

The absence of ‘Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead’ from the Chart Show is significant. This programme is broadcast on BBC Radio 1, which caters mainly for 15-29 year olds, i.e. a generation for whom Margaret Thatcher is largely a figure of history. She was ousted as prime minister in 1990 and dementia in later life meant that she had not been seen in public for many years. The manner of her funeral was thus crucial in securing her legacy. A desire to shape the future was what motivated both the pro and anti-Thatcher camps. For those who adulated her there was a risk that playing the full song on Radio 1 might result in it being the sole thing for which she was associated in the minds of the younger generation. This was, therefore, not just a storm in a tea cup. Being relegated to a song of ridicule would have been a fate worse than being reduced to, say, a nice cup of tea – as is the case with Charles Grey, the 2nd Earl Grey who was prime minister at the time of the Reform Act of 1832, just prior to the old Palace of Westminster going up in smoke.

The ostensible reason why ‘Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead’ was not played in full by the BBC was on the grounds of taste and propriety (Reynolds 2013). Similarly, parliament’s decision to silence Big Ben for Lady Thatcher’s funeral was as a mark of ‘profound dignity and deep respect’ (Bercow cited in Hall 2013). But it also facilitated a crucial objective by shifting attention to a famous precedent. Aside from repairs, the last time Big Ben fell silent

was for the funeral of Winston Churchill in 1965. The muffling of the bell was therefore part of a clear strategy: to establish Margaret Thatcher in an on-going chain, the preceding link of which was formed by a man habitually lauded as ‘the greatest Briton’ (Wyatt 2002).

That the metaphor of the chain is a widespread phenomenon is apparent in *The Collective Memory Reader*, where notions of the ‘chain of memory’ appear frequently, either in terms of breaking, establishing or maintaining links – and ensuring that other associations are marginalised or erased (Olick et al 2011: 77, 102-3, 133, 165, 211, 233, 378 & 382).

This has ramifications for the monumental landscape of Westminster. The statues there are officially endorsed. Popular protest is tightly curtailed within a one kilometre radius of parliament. This is legally enforced by the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act (2005). This and other efforts to limit demonstrations in the vicinity of the Houses of Parliament were closely linked to the campaigner, Brian Haw (1949-2011). [Fig. 3] In June 2001 he erected a peace camp in Parliament Square and, despite repeated attempts to evict him, Haw remained there until his death a decade later. Because his protest began prior to subsequent legislation he was allowed to stay – but with his passing, no-one else will be able to do as he had done.

Today there is no physical or commemorative trace of Brian Haw in Parliament Square. For the authorities, Haw is in death, as in life, a *persona non grata*. In the monumental landscape he’s a nobody.



Fig. 3 Brian Haw in Parliament Square (7 July 2007). Photo: Stuart Burch

Nobody history

The echelons of statues and plaques, monuments and memorials that constitute *London's Immortals* occlude 'the infinite others whose memory is lost without trace' (Blackwood 1989; Bobbio 2001: 22). The latter are what the cartoonist, Will Eisner refers to as 'invisible people' (Eisner 2006: 305-415). This graphic artist is one of those 'distinct persons' that I carry about in my head, sharing and shaping experience as Dickens did for Halbwachs during his visit to London. Eisner's images depict a specific city – New York – but his aim was to use them to reveal truths about metropolitan life the world over (Eisner 2006: 3). In *The Building* (1987), for example, the demolition of a block of flats means that the ghosts of four former occupants are all that remains of an 'invisible accumulation of dramas' (Eisner 2006: 145). Eisner's spectres mirror any given city's living population of invisible people. Exiting St Thomas' Hospital that day in early January 2012, I numbered myself among them. The

previous days' travails were etched on my exhausted face. Nevertheless, this inner turmoil remained 'unnoticed [to] the people who streamed past me' (Eisner 2006: 307). Yes, I shared the same space as these strangers, but we were each lost in our own mental landscapes of joy or despair (cf. Roca 2011: 367). Alone in my grief in the midst of a crowd it was as if I had become a character in the cartoon world of Will Eisner.

Compounding my sense of loss was the realisation that, with the death of my mother, my family would become atomised. She was the centre to which we gravitated in order to share our group memories – and forge new ones. This has been dealt a fatal blow. Without our mother it would be far harder to retrieve or reconstruct the shared recollections of our family unit and those 'peculiar memories' that only we commemorate (Halbwachs 1992: 52, 59 & 63). Nor would the laying of future memories be so easy given that opportunities for exchange would arise with far less frequency (Halbwachs 1992: 54). Be in no doubt: this is the death knell of memory. 'The dead retreat into the past' when 'nothing remains of the group in which they passed their lives'. As a consequence 'names slowly become obliterated' (Halbwachs 1992: 73). Other groups, however – those that are more resilient, better connected and empowered – succeed in establishing a cult. Calling the Clock Tower of the Houses of Parliament after the first name of a hereditary monarch is a means of enforcing memory by causing it to 'symbolize [something] beyond the material sign' (Halbwachs 1992: 72).

In contrast, my family, with its paltry connections do not provide access to those 'elite circles' that can secure posthumous renown (Cosser in Halbwachs 1992: 31). We number among those '[f]amilies of no importance – so much is lost, entire histories, there is no room for it all. There are only the generations surging forward like the tide, the years filled with sound and froth, then being washed over by the rest. That is the legacy of the cities' (Salter 2007: 8).

It is a sad truth that we live and die in a world made up of ‘somebody people’ and ‘nobody people’ (Bowie 1972). I find myself firmly ensconced in the latter camp. The moment my mother died is merely a ‘trifling incident’ (Gosse 1907: 36) for all but a handful of people. In contrast, the demise of ‘somebody people’ is met with such wailing and gnashing of teeth that others are obliged to pay attention, even if the deceased person in question was unknown and uncared for. This is because guardians of memory seek to promote their vision through their dead heroes. If amnesia is a virus (Huysen 1995: 7), some are in possession of a vaccine promising immunity. Inoculation is, however, a difficult and laborious process, fraught with complexity and danger (Burch 2012a).

The inequalities of the living are mirrored by the exclusions of the dead. It has been noted that ‘historical figures, heroes, great men of war no less than artists shelter themselves from death in this way: they enter the memory of peoples; they are examples, active presences’ (Blanchot 1982: 94). But this is no benign refuge. Memory is parasitical; a cuckoo-like planting in another’s nest – whether the host likes it or not (cf. de Certeau 1984: 86). For we are all hosts to countless memory parasites. Some hosts are receptive to their symbionts, especially if they happen to hold them in high esteem. Even those that do not, however, may still be obliged to carry these ‘distinct persons’ in their mental baggage. Dislodging a memory parasite that has gained a foothold can be very tricky, not least when myth-making leads to such levels of obsession that the hero effectively controls those in his or her thrall (Bergson 1935: 166). This is particularly unfortunate in the case of heroes who turn out to be despicable hangers-on: like an all-conquering sportsman who is later revealed to be a drug cheat; or a popular celebrity whose charitable work transpires to have been simply a means of facilitating terrible sexual crimes. In such circumstances an elaborate process of *damnatio memoriae* is necessary in a futile attempt to expunge a grotesquely alluring anti-hero (Burch 2012c).

In the literature on collective memory forgetting is a firmly accepted idea and, indeed, seen as a very positive thing. This has given rise to notions of ‘productive forgetting’ (Huysen 1995: 7) and ‘blissful blindness’ (Nietzsche 2007: 103). We are told that, in order for museums and archives to make sense, ‘a great deal of forgetting must happen first’ (Sterne in Bijsterveld & van Dijck 2009: 57). One of the best studies on forgetting is Bradford Vivian’s *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again*. But before we get to read about public forgetting we are provided with an instance of private remembering: the book is dedicated to the author’s ‘unforgettable’ wife with additional acknowledgments to both his parents and his son (Vivian 2010: x).

That this act of intergenerational remembering should serve as a prelude to an exploration of forgetting is what makes the study of memory so fascinating (cf. Forty & Küchler 1999: 2 & 16). Vivian’s decision to deploy his publication as a textual memorial is appropriate. Arguably the objects that ‘best image our being’ are books: ‘A book in one’s own library is in a sense a brick in the building of one’s being, carrying with it memories, a small block of one’s personal intellectual history, associations unsortable in their profusion’ (Aristides cited in Tuan 1977: 187).

Authors, as we have seen, can feature as ‘distinct persons’ in our lives. And books – even when dog-eared and mass-produced – can themselves become cherished objects. This is especially the case when they are inscribed with a dedication or scrawled all over by a puzzled schoolboy: like my copy of *Mrs Dalloway*, onto the inside cover of which I have stapled the receipt. Dated 2:13 pm on Friday, March 29, 1991 it is a fragile memorial to an unrecalled purchase on an unremarkable day.

The destiny of such books is the purgatory of the charity shop. Fortunately this fate has not yet befallen the only material possessions that I have inherited from my mother: her small collection of books, most of which are by or about the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas

(1914-53). His words were an immense comfort to me in the days following my mother's death, particularly the poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. Thomas dedicated this work to his father, but the message is universal. It urged all those whose 'words had forked no lightning' to 'rage against the dying of the light' (Jones 1990: 208). One person who fell into this category was my mum. Beyond those lucky enough to be related to her or live next door, few people got to know her. She didn't attract attention like lightning does – she was far too modest for that. And for this she is consigned to oblivion, like all those 'obscure heroes' (Bergson 1935: 38) whose words do not shriek for attention.

One of my mother's books was a gift from me following a trip to New York. John Brinnin's 'intimate journal', *Dylan Thomas in America* (1955) ends with the tragic account of how Thomas drank so much alcohol that he was admitted to St Vincent's Hospital in New York where he slipped into a coma. Brinnin's description of his bedside vigil is painfully familiar. In a phrase that encapsulates the disparity between inner and outer time, the author recalls the Friday before Thomas died as the 'longest night of all, when every clock stood still' (Brinnin 1955: 282). By the morning of Monday November 9, 1953 Brinnin took one look at Thomas and realised 'that, somewhere in the night, he had gone into his final phase' (Brinnin 1955: 291). A few hours later he was dead.

Whilst in Manhattan I bought Brinnin's book and took it on a pilgrimage to the White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street – one of Dylan Thomas's most favourite haunts – and then walked up 11th Street to the hospital where he died. Nowadays my memories of seeing the main entrance of St Vincent's Hospital merge with the look of fear I saw on my mother face as she arrived at St Thomas' Hospital and stared up at its cliff-like façade. She knew instinctively that this imposing building would be where she was to die.

It is easy to dismiss hospitals as 'non-places'; just another of those 'transit points and temporary abodes' that do not qualify as anthropological places (Augé 1997: 77-78). This is

perhaps especially true of the concrete walls and white tile cladding of Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardall's St Thomas' Hospital building (1962-76). Its Brutalist style has all the hallmarks of a non-place. Not to be valued – or, at least, not by today's aesthetic standards, even if there are signs that we are beginning to be more appreciative of our post-war concrete inheritance (Murray 2013).

Heritage is inherently selective, determining the sorts of places that merit preserving: just like the hierarchies and exclusions of collective memory (Burch 2012b). Its workings function as a filter determining that which future generations will and will not inherit. The decision to preserve or demolish a building is a political act – as is evident from responses to the destruction of the Edwardian wing of Jessop Hospital in Sheffield. This was the first such establishment where women in labour could be treated outside the home (Williams 2013). With its removal goes the 'accumulated memories' of a building that was 'barnacled with laughter and stained by tears' (Eisner 2006: 144).

A means to revive these annihilated associations is to adopt Gaston Bachelard's approach to 'the localization of memory' (Bachelard 1994: 8). His deployment of topoanalysis as 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives' can and should be extended to a 'non-place' such as St Thomas' Hospital. In doing so we will quickly become aware of the memories that mount in every humdrum corner. It was fitting, for example, that my mother should finally be defeated in a little patch of St Thomas' hospital that will be forever Wales: the Coronary care unit of St Thomas' is dedicated to the Welsh-speaking cardiologist, Evan Jones who died in 1969 (Matthews 1970).

The plural possessive of 'St Thomas' Hospital' indicates it to be a double memorial, invoking as it does both St Thomas Becket and Thomas the Apostle (Clark 1871). Its history stretches back far further than appearances might suggest. One illustrious character in this

institutional story is Florence Nightingale whose nurses' training school opened there before the hospital relocated to the banks of the Thames. Parts of it serve as a living memorial to the First World War. Its dramatic history during the Second World War are recounted by one of the few employees to remain working there throughout the conflict, the surgeon Frank B. Cockett (born 1916). Following a particularly devastating attack he looked across from the bomb-damaged hospital to see that Big Ben had sustained 'three large holes in the clock face' (Cockett 1990: 1466). And as I read those words today I morph this factual event with a fanciful recollection of that scene in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* when the hero kicks his way out to dangle from the hands of time. I wonder if my mum ever saw that film? It's too late to ask her now.

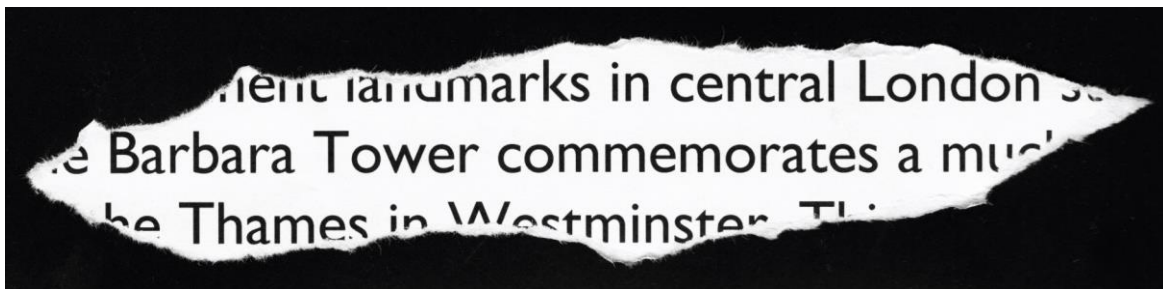


Fig. 4 Text Fragment. Photo: Stuart Burch

To end at the beginning

This chapter was written as a memorial to my mother such that, 'printed, her memory will last' (cf. Barthes 1993: 63). There is an onus on me to keep her memory alive (Bobbio 2001: 64). On these pages this invisible, no-body person vies for attention with monarchs and ministers of state. For me, the Clock Tower of the Houses of Parliament is in reality 'the Barbara Tower'. And, should London be afflicted by some future apocalypse and only a scrap of paper from this book survive, historians of tomorrow will struggle in vain to piece together a plausible explanation. Why was it so called? In honour of Saint Barbara who was locked in a tower? Perhaps. After all, there are many statues of the saint with this attribute clutched in

her martyred hand (V&A n.d.). Or maybe it was named after one Barbara Ann Burch? That much seems clear from the fragment of a book on memory that appears to date from roughly the same period. [Fig. 4] Not much is known about this person, but she was evidently held in high esteem given that a tower appears to have been named in her honour. Alas, only fragments of this monument remain – and its purpose is now impossible to discern.

Meanwhile, back in the here-and-now, I can't exert the influence necessary to dominate public space and impose my values on others. But there is one act of naming that I *have* been able to enact. For the same hands that held my mother as she died, nine months later cradled a newborn baby girl. Her middle name is Barbara. A name by which to 'anchor' her and attach her to a grandmother she was never lucky enough to meet (Halbwachs 1992: 71-72). But, as Halbwachs reminds me, we are never alone. And there is every chance that Barbara Burch *née* Prince will be a 'distinct person' in my daughter's future life.

List of Figures

Fig.1 Big Ben 3D Puzzle. Image courtesy of © Ravensburger Ltd. All rights reserved.

Fig.2 William Wordsworth, Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey (1798). Lyrical Ballads, vol. 1, 4th ed., London: Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, 1805, p. 193.
Photograph by Stuart Burch.

Fig.3 Brian Haw in Parliament Square, July 7, 2007. Photograph by Stuart Burch.

Fig.4 Text Fragment. Photograph by Stuart Burch.

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